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The Future of Human Nature

BY JÜRGEN HABERMAS

Oxford: Polity Press, 2003. viii + 127 pp. £40.00 cloth, £13.99 paper

This book comprises three lectures delivered by Habermas over the past three years. The collection forms another contribution to his ongoing engagement with Rawls and the political liberalism which Rawls represents. It also constitutes an important contribution to reflection on the future of ethics, especially in light of developments in genetic science. In the first lecture, entitled ‘Are there postmetaphysical answers to the question: what is the good life?’, Habermas describes the post-Rawlsian separation of moral theory from ethics that his book addresses. (It is well known that Habermas sees greater differences between himself and Rawls than Rawls does between himself and Habermas.) He wishes to develop a theory accounting for the motivation to act morally that is not dependent for its validity on ‘normatively laden facts’ about the cosmos, human nature and history. One possibility is that questions of justice and morality may continue to draw responses from Kant and subsequent deontology. Another employs the Kierkegaardian ethical concept of ‘being oneself’, which Kierkegaard thought engendered a form of despair from which only a transition to the religious sphere could free the individual. Habermas subjects this transition to a ‘linguistic turn’ which ‘permits a deflationary interpretation of the “wholly other”’. Put more simply, many people now conceive of God as immanent within the world and a product of language, rather than as transcendent. Faith in this type of God will not, however, provide the individual with the same possibility of transcending despair. The ethics of ‘being oneself’ now becomes the final end, based on choice, rather than an intermediate one. Moreover, genetic science now provides the real possibility that what ‘being oneself’ means will become the object of societal production rather than subjective, personal self-realisation.

The second and principal essay, ‘The debate on the ethical self-understanding of the species’, considers how moral decisions about human nature might be made in circumstances in which human nature can be formed by human choices. Habermas believes that humanity

has almost reached this point: 'If we consider that medical mavericks are already busy working on the reproductive cloning of human organisms, we cannot help but feel that the human species might soon be able to take its biological evolution into its own hands.' (p. 21) Some might argue that humanity is already beginning to do this. If either is the case, then the classical order of a shared conception of human nature generating an ethic which epistemologically grounds a moral framework and motivates adherence to it is no longer valid. Our existing moral self-understanding, based on a view of human nature as essentially unchanging and unchangeable, can no longer be preserved. What is needed to replace it is autonomous moral action grounded in the reflection of humanity on what it wishes to become. A realm of contingency has subsumed at least part of what was Kant's kingdom of necessity, and any attempt simply to prevent change is now bound to fail. The Kantian association of morality with freedom (or its loss) becomes, in fact, even more pertinent in the contemporary world, and offers both a blessing and a curse. Habermas describes 'the feeling of vertigo that seizes us when the ground beneath our feet, which we believed to be solid, begins to slip'. (p. 39)

Habermas proceeds to show that what is needed to underpin this ground is a renewed understanding of the fusion of nature and soul – both in particular persons, and humanity as a whole – that will withstand the objectifying tendency of genetic manipulation and generate, in response, a principle of respect for transformable nature. Failure to recognise this could bring about a new human servitude to nature on the cusp of modernity's domination of it. In practice, what is at risk is the communicative mode of character formation such as may take place in family, school and wider society. Opposed to it are preferences given to the 'person', if he or she can still be called this, which estrange her from 'her' body such that she becomes the mere observer of it. If birth were to become the end-point in a production process determined by public policy and private choice, rather than a stage in natural growth, there would be the danger of a dissonance of intention, instead of the gradual appropriating of intention that occurs during socialisation. In other words, human beings would be likely to resent the choices about their nature made by others before their birth, rather than by

themselves as they grow up. Habermas describes this as a new paternalism of essence far deeper than the traditional paternalism of existence, daily living and material support. He states: 'What is at stake, therefore, with the instrumentalisation of prepersonal life is the ethical self-understanding of the species, which is crucial for whether or not we may go on to see ourselves as beings committed to moral judgement and action. Where we lack compelling moral reasons, we have to let ourselves be guided by the signposts set up by the ethics of the species.' (p. 71) This seems to be calling us to reflect on the most fundamental categories of the human experience so far - consciousness, subjectivity, reason, communication - and to consider whether or not we want to continue to be a species capable of flourishing, of choice and of forming the world. The choice is ours.

In a postscript to this second essay, Habermas addresses the possibility that designer humans might not regard themselves to be victims of interference. They might be unaware that they have been designed, or aware of the fact but not resentful of it. Nevertheless, Habermas believes that there are both ontological and pragmatic reasons for regarding the genetic designing of humans as interference. What it breaks is 'the deontological shell which assures the individuality of the person, the uniqueness of the individual, and the irreplaceability of one's subjectivity'. (p. 82) Once genetic profile becomes an object of choice (or potential yet omitted choice!), parents and others become *responsible* for it. Moreover, designing a high-quality baby might be quite difficult, and produce results no better than a birth in which there was no genetic intervention. Someone with an extraordinarily good memory and exceptionally high intelligence might, for instance, be unable to forget things that, for the sake of psychological health, need to be forgotten, and might become an object of envy or ridicule (or both) by peers to whom he finds it difficult to relate.

The third and final essay, 'Faith and knowledge', delivered in October 2001, addresses not bioethics but 'secularization in our postsecular societies'. Habermas considers religious fundamentalism (which, unlike many Britons, he unashamedly identifies as a motivating force behind the 11 September terrorist attacks) to be the result of 'an accelerated

and radically uprooting modernization'. This itself is uncontroversial, but he proceeds to make some important connexions with his preceding material. As in issues of genetic engineering, it is the rapidity of change and of the increase in autonomy that can generate polarised responses. Cognitive dissonance can develop in a pluralist society between different consciousnesses, both religious and secular. This dissonance can occur when scientific method and perspective become too powerful in relation to other discourses. That is because a purely scientific 'process' of decision-making is opposed to a theistic understanding of creation and sustenance by a being who, because not subject to laws of nature, determines some aspects of existence but also bestows freedom.

Habermas offers one of the principal alternatives to postmodern agnosticism about the future of humanity, and for this reason alone is well worth reading. He moves quickly beyond linguistic analysis, rhetoric and other prolegomena to consider the fundamental and pressing questions that confront humanity. One question in my mind concerns what he might mean by an 'ethics of the species'. Perhaps a cosmic existentialism reminiscent of Bergson's, according to which unity and objectivity lie in the past, and no teleology exists to determine the future development of life? This would suggest, staying with Bergson, a morality and religion of *movement*, rather than a static one that tries to cope with, rather than to define, societal change. For his part, Habermas states in an endnote that an 'ethics of the species' would be deontological rather than the result of radical existential choice. Perhaps the autonomous legislator for humanity who takes duty seriously is, however, an existentialist as well.

One might develop this discussion further with insights of Hannah Arendt's, whose concept of natality Habermas briefly discusses. Natality can be used to describe the new beginning that human life brings into the world by virtue of not being an object of production. It refers to creation from a contingent point within the created order that is defined by its own unique and inalienable set of conditions. Arendt also sees, like Habermas, the political importance of communicative action, and the co-originality of public and private autonomy. It

is on the strength of these that societies are preserved or collapse, and it is these that give humanity responsibility for its future. Where do we want to go?